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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Pony Express and offers the use of anecdotes as a way to make history more interesting to students. Along with facts about the Pony Express, there are activities for writing projects for enrichment purposes. Activities include: (1) letter writing; (2) news releases; and (3) diary writing. Suggestions are made for similar activities with other historical eras and events. (EH)

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THE PONY EXPRESS:

ANECDOTES AND WRITING PROJECTS

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THE PONY EXPRESS:

ANECDOTES AND WRITING PROJECTS

The Pony Express shortened the mail transit time between coasts by ten days, demonstrated the superiority of the central route through the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada for year-round travel, encouraged Congress to assist in the building of the first transcontinental railroad along the same route, and was a factor in holding California for the Union during the Civil War. Riders braved storms, blizzards, high water, darkness, deserts, and mountain passes, and with their daring, they captured the imagination of the country. Too few textbooks make history interesting. Anecdotes, though, can turn history into a fascinating story, whether the topic be the Pony Express or some other aspect of history. Writing projects can add variety.

ANECDOTES ON THE PONY EXPRESS

Dee Brown, author of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, is a noted authority on the Pony Express. His "Pony Express" (1976) is especially interesting and has a basis in the research done by Raymond W. and Mary L. Settle (1955), two well-know experts

on the subject. Teachers (or students) can use Brown's article for anecdotes on the Pony Express.

Brown begins his story with an anecdote about the train that brought the first mail for the Pony Express from the East to St. Joseph, Missouri, on April 3, 1860. Having missed a connection in Detroit, the mail was a few hours late when it reached Hannibal, Missouri. To make up for lost time, the train crossed the state at a breakneck forty miles an hour, a new speed record for the time period.

Riders carried the mail in a mochila (knapsack in Spanish) over their saddles. Four pouches could be padlocked, one to the front and rear of each leg. According to Root and Hickman (1946, 52), on April 3, 1860, as the first pony and rider waited for the mail, the assembled multitude, desirous of having a souvenir, swooped down on the horse and almost plucked her bare of any mane or tail hairs.

At the beginning of employment, all riders received a red shirt and a pair of blue Levi Strauss denim jeans. Most, though, wore a buckskin shirt, cloth trousers, high boots, and a jockey cap or slouch hat. A buckskin suit with hair on the outside could shed rain in a storm (Hafen 1923, 9). Some thirty or more young men covered 1,966 miles between St. Joseph and Sacramento, California, in roughly ten days at about nine miles an hour on horseback. The route cut across northeastern Kansas,

southern Nebraska, through the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, into Utah, skirted the south edge of the Great Salt Lake, across the alkali flats of Nevada, to Lake Tahoe, through the Sierra Nevada, and into Sacramento. According to Bailey (1898, 889), on the first westbound trip, a rider suffered a broken leg. A Wells-Fargo stage picked him up, and an agent of the coach rode the horse with mail on to Sacramento. At the same time that the first westbound rider was leaving St. Joseph, the first eastbound rider was leaving San Francisco, California, where he boarded a boat for Sacramento. On the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada, he hit chest-high snow, but pack trains of mules and freight wagons helped keep the route open (Majors 1893, 176). The first westbound mail weighed less than fifteen pounds. The eighty-five pieces, protected from the weather by oiled silk, included letters (five dollars per half ounce plus the regular ten cents postage for United States mail), telegrams, bank drafts, and newspapers printed on thin paper.

William H. Russell organized the Pony Express for the purpose of capturing a six hundred thousand dollar government-subsidized mail contract from the Butterfield stage company. Russell was a New Englander who had been in many successful and unsuccessful business ventures before becoming a partner with Alexander Majors and William B. Waddell in the West's largest wagon-freighting business. Majors was from Kentucky and had

engaged in the freighting business from an early age. Waddell was from Virginia and had been a farmer and the owner of a dry goods store in Lexington, Missouri. The firm at its height owned 6,250 wagons, seventy-five thousand oxen and one thousand mules, and employed five thousand men as drivers and stationkeepers. Wagons delivered supplies to miners, military posts, and settlers. Those same individuals demanded faster mail service from the East. Since 1858, the Butterfield stageline had carried mail from St. Louis, Missouri, to San Francisco, but by way of El Paso, Texas, due to Southern influence in Congress and a desire to avoid snow; the trip took three weeks.

The firm borrowed money to organize the Pony Express. Russell had sixty days to make the service operational. During these sixty days he bought five hundred horses and employed stationkeepers, stock tenders, and eighty riders. About 190 stations were stocked and manned. No expense was spared in equipping the stations. Ordered were brooms, candles, well pulleys, buckets, rope, window glass, doors, dishes, horse brushes, wagon grease, rails, screws, stovepipe, scissors, axes, etc. Food included macaroni, dried fruits, flour, salt, pickles, tripe (intestines and stomach walls), syrup, coffee, hams, bacon, beef, corn meal, raisins, etc. Medicines for man and beast were borax, turpentine, and castor oil. Russell ran

advertisements in newspapers for riders not over eighteen; orphans weighing under 130 pounds and willing to risk death daily were given preference. Riders took an oath to avoid profane language, liquor, and gambling. They were presented with the Holy Bible and a pair of Colt revolvers upon employment. Though organized quickly, the express proved incredibly dependable, despite the logistics of coordinating riders, horses, stations, and supplies across nearly two thousand miles of desolate territory without any real means of communication.

Riders began and ended their rides at home stations (often stagecoach stops) located forty to a hundred miles apart depending upon the terrain. Riders changed horses every ten to twenty miles at relay stations. Stations were built with timber, or with sod on the Plains, or with adobe in desert country. Russell bought grain in the Midwest and hauled it in wagons for hundreds of miles, because grain-fed horses could outrun the grass-fed Indian mounts. West of Salt Lake City, Utah, Mormons supplied grain, hay, and food. In desert country, wagons hauled water for great distances. At relay stations, riders had two minutes to change horses, eat and drink. The yelling of a rider or a blown horn alerted the station to an incoming pony. Horses were fitted with lightweight saddles made by special order.

Initially, the service set a limit of twenty pounds for each mail. Each run averaged about a hundred letters compared to the six thousand letters that one Butterfield stage might carry. To increase volume, the Pony Express lowered its rates to one dollar per half ounce on July 1, 1861. The number of riders had already increased from eighty to well over a hundred. Riders received about $125 a month (good pay for the time period), room and board. Stationkeepers received fifty to one hundred dollars a month depending upon their location. Horses cost about two hundred dollars each, or four times the cost of an ordinary riding horse. Express horses were tough, undersized California mustangs of Mexican stock, sure-footed and fast. The upkeep of horses and stations, lost equipment during a Paiute Indian uprising in Nevada, and a payroll for more than five hundred employees soon ran costs to more than thirty thousand dollars a month; expenses were exceeding income by about two-thirds.

Two famous Pony Express riders were Robert (Pony Bob) Haslam and William F. Cody. Pony Bob set the record for endurance. On May 11, 1860, Haslam left the Lake Tahoe area for his regular seventy-seven mile run, but at Carson City, Nevada, all the horses had been taken by miners in pursuit of Paiutes. Haslam continued on to Fort Churchill where the relief rider, hearing of Paiute raids, refused to mount up for his 115 mile

run. The station official offered Haslam fifty dollars to make the trip. At the end of the line, Haslam found out that he had to take the same run back to Fort Churchill. Along the way he came across the smoking ruins of a relay station and the body of the stationkeeper, half eaten by wolves. The horses were gone, so Haslam and tired mount continued on. At Fort Churchill, there was no relief rider, so Haslam made his regular run back to Lake Tahoe, arriving there on May 13; he had covered 384 miles in thirty-six hours. Pony Bob eventually left the West. He moved to Chicago, went into business, and retired a wealthy man.

Other riders included Jack Keetly, who rode 340 miles in thirty-one hours, Jim Moore, who set the speed record by riding 280 miles in fourteen hours and forty-six minutes, and handsome Richard Egan, who covered 330 miles in one run and who later became a Mormon bishop. In one unproven legend, Johnny Frey's girlfriend supposedly invented the doughnut so that Johnny could spear one with his finger as he galloped past her home on his Kansas route. According to Majors (1893, 188-91), J. G. Kelley eventually became an eminent mining engineer and mineralogist in Denver, Colorado. During his Pony Express days, Kelley talked about having to build bridges across streams with Willow branches. On the banks of the Carson River, he helped build an adobe shelter made out of bricks of dried mud. To get the mud

mixed and at the right consistency, he had to trample around in it with his bare feet day after day, with the result that his feet became permanently swollen probably as a consequence of the alkali in the mud. Kelley also spoke of riding in on a camp of Paiute Indians by accident. For a piece of tobacco and a look at his gun, he left the camp unmolested.

Records of casualties are almost nonexistent. Newspapers listed one rider as a casualty of Paiutes. Another was scalped along the Platte River, his horse escaping to carry the mail on to the next station. In Nevada, records listed seven stations burned by Paiutes and between seven and sixteen stationkeepers killed. Only one mochila was lost in eighteen to nineteen months of operation. The Pony Express carried reports of Lincoln's election, his inaugural speech in which he warned the South about the consequences of seceding, dispatches about Fort Sumter, and Union military messages about raising an army and the deployment of troops. The heaviest users were the newspapers, businessmen, and government officials. The most expensive letter cost $135 and was sent by a British official to his government about fleet movements in the Pacific.

As it turns out, the Pony Express never succeeded in winning the government mail contract away from the Butterfield stage company. To keep from bankruptcy, Russell persuaded an official of the federal government with the Interior Department

to lend him eight hundred thousand dollars in Indian Trust Fund bonds, though later Russell claimed that he did not know the source of the bonds. On Christmas Eve, 1860, Russell's illegal activities were discovered. He was indicted for fraud, but escaped prosecution due to the fact that he had testified about the matter before a congressional committee. An 1857 law exempted such witnesses from criminal prosecution. In early 1861, Ben Holladay, "the Stagecoach King," succeeded in acquiring the express. In October 1861, telegraph services spanned the continent, and on October 26, the Pony Express ceased operations. The firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell went bankrupt, losing at least a half-million dollars on the Pony Express. During its existence, the express carried 34,743 pieces of mail with receipts totaling $90,141. Russell attempted a comeback in Colorado in 1861, but failed again. Majors stayed in the freighting business for a few more years, but then lost everything he possessed. Waddell never engaged in business again. Financial losses and Civil War tragedies left him a mental wreck.

WRITING PROJECTS FOR ENRICHMENT PURPOSES

Churchill and Churchill (1973, 61-65) state that enrichment activities can make social studies a more stimulating, enjoyable, and rewarding experience. They describe writing

projects that have been used with success in secondary classrooms to encourage students to write independently and creatively. These projects can be scaled up or down in difficulty to meet the needs and abilities of students.

In one activity, students write letters. Letter writing allows creative thinking to combine with historic learning. Students may write letters from the viewpoint of any historic individual. The letter writer may be a well-know historic figure or some little-known person. The letter recipient may be an actual person or an imaginary character. The letter's content must reflect the student's research into the time period. Creativeness is valued, but accuracy is paramount. Letter writing projects could involve the following people:

A sixteen year old youth writing to a brother or sister about a decision to seek employment as a Pony Express rider

An artist writing home about the beauties of the changing landscape and topography along the route of the Pony Express

A singing cowboy writing out the words to his favorite songs in a letter to his favorite girl

A stationkeeper or division superintendent writing to Russell, Majors & Waddell about business practices that could lead to greater profits and better service

William Russell writing in 1859 to Majors and Waddell about his vision for a mail service to California

William Russell writing to his employees about the bankruptcy of the Pony Express

Churchill and Churchill provide additional examples for other units of study as follows:

A soldier with Alexander writing to his wife

A Spartan boy to his girl friend

A Roman tribune to a senator concerning upcoming legislation

A nobleman to a knight concerning a coming conflict

A boy applying to a guild member for apprenticeship in the guild

A general in Napoleon's army writing to his son or daughter before the beginning of the Russian invasion

A Confederate youth writing to his Northern uncle shortly before the battle at Bull Run

President Wilson writing the German ambassador concerning Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare

An Oklahoma farmer writing to his brother as he prepared to move his family to California in search of work in 1933

A Russian at Stalingrad writing to his brother in Moscow

following the seige at Stalingrad

Winston Churchill writing to President Roosevelt concerning the possibility of a meeting with Stalin

A survivor of the atomic attack at Hiroshima writing to a friend in Tokyo

An Israeli pilot writing to his wife following the first day of the Six-Day War

In a second activity, students write news releases to cover historic events. This activity allows for creativity while also requiring research and attention to detail. Teachers should stress that good reporting requires the journalist to answer five questions: Who? What? When? Where? and Why? At times, the journalist may also need to answer a sixth question, How? Students should use these questions to organize their news articles. Further, each question should be researched carefully.

News releases can be assigned to groups of students or to individuals. For reasons of maximum coverage, the same news article should not be assigned to all members of the class. A better idea is to make class assignments of related articles. As part of a class project, students could write articles to reflect a specific time period for inclusion in a newspaper that they might develop. News release topics should be specific and narrow in scope, since a limited topic is more easily covered in

a shorter period of time. Research should undergird the writing of a news release. Student ability will dictate the amount of research that is necessary. Topics suited for news release writing are as follows:

The inaugural ride of the Pony Express from St. Joseph to Sacramento

The Paiute Indian uprising

Trouble on the trail

Pony Bob's endurance record

William H. Russell and the Indian Trust Fund scandal

The demise of the Pony Express

Completion of the telegraph to California and plans for the first transcontinental railroad

Churchill and Churchill provide additional examples for other units of study as follows:

Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry

The capture of John Wilkes Booth

The sinking of the Lusitania

The signing of the Armistice ending World War I

The Beer Hall Putsh

The Reichstag fire

The Pearl Harbor attack

MacArthur's return to the Philippines

The death of Benito Mussolini

A Ghandi hunger strike

The invasion of South Korea

The Tonkin Bay incident

In a third activity, students write historic diaries. Churchill and Churchill state that among some of history's most important records are the diaries of the people who have participated in history-making events. Diaries give researchers invaluable material about different time periods. The social, political, and economic conditions of a period are often gleaned from a diary, as are the mores, dress, and education of the day. People of power and heads of state have kept diaries. But often more revealing are the diaries written by private individuals, diaries never intended for publication. These diaries can offer a perspective not found elsewhere, a perspective from the viewpoint of the person who has been affected by the decisions of others.

When students write historic diaries, they assume the identities of characters long dead. They prepare diaries as they might have been written. Research and creativity come together. Diaries can be long or short. A day in the life of a person might cover one page, whereas the highlights of a year in the life of the same person might take several pages. Assignments are geared to student abilities and interests. Some

possible diary assignments are as follows:

A naturalist's diary of the flora and fauna found in the areas served by the Pony Express

The diary of a person interested in recording the dress, speech, manner, and customs of the people met along the route of the Pony Express

Three days in the life of a Pony Express rider on the trail

The diary of a stationkeeper or division superintendent in the supervision and maintenance of the Pony Express route

The thoughts of a Paiute Indian boy or girl or adult

The thoughts of a female observer about the developments brought to the West by the Pony Express

The thoughts of a black freight-wagon driver delivering supplies to trail stations as he considers the impact of the Pony Express on California and the maneuvering by both the Union and Confederacy to gain California's allegiance

Churchill and Churchill provide additional examples for other units of study as follows:

A week's entries of an overseer in the building of the Great Pyramid

A soldier with Hannibal from Carthage to Rome

A day at a Roman circus

A knight's account of a Crusade

Martin Luther's life during the early days of the Reformation

The secret diary of a sailor with Columbus

A soldier with Cortez in Mexico

A year in the life of a Jamestown settler

An account of a journey from Missouri to Oregon by covered wagon

A Confederate soldier's account of the Battle of Gettysburg

A doughboy's life in a trench in France in 1917

A Kansas farmer's thoughts during the Depression years

The diary of a British shopkeeper during the Battle of Britain

"Dead as bones: dry as dust" need not be the condemnation heaped upon the study and teaching of the social studies. Interested and creative teachers will use anecdotes and writing activities to add a little zest to their teaching, whether the topic be the Pony Express or some other aspect of history.

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